
MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY (DRAFT)
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Pondera Shooting Sports Club building
Conrad, MT
April 2 and 3, 2013 (Meeting 15)

Advisory Council members present: Joe Perry (Chair), Jay Gore, Bernie Hart, Gordon Haugen, Bill Howell, Mike Jensen, Craig Roberts, and Jim Shockley.

Other staff and guests: Bruce Auchly, Gordon Bechard, Gary Bertellotti, Diane Boyd, Pete Husby (NRCS), Ken McDonald, Rick Northrup, Clive Rooney (DNRC), Brad Schmitz, Graham Taylor, and Ryan Williamson.

Tuesday, April 2.

1. **Tour and review of habitat projects in the vicinity of Conrad and Choteau.** Council visited an Open Fields project site, state lands project, a shelterbelt project on private land, and a project developed by Craig Roberts on private land. Lunch at Joe Perry's with a discussion of habitat enhancements at Joe's place.
2. **Council meeting convened at 2:00 pm.** Council had input on draft minutes from Sept. 10, 2012 meeting. Modifications included removing "Dugas" from page 2 and rewording EQC paragraph on page 5.

Bill Howell moved to accept the meeting minutes as adjusted and Jay Gore seconded. All approved - motion carried.

3. **Rick provided an overview of Debbie's presentation on her work plan and input from Regions 1, 2, 3, and 5.**

Statewide opportunities: Farm Bill outlook – funding for conservation programs will decrease, although CRP is "exempt" from any decrease in funding. New general CRP sign will occur May 20 through June 14. Currently FSA is working on establishing rental rates and cost-share rates. There has been a history of UGBEP involvement with CRP.

- Discussion on Open Fields model – should program continuation
- Other opportunities for program promotion, perhaps looking at ways to engage state land lessees or perhaps to give food plot seed bags.

Coordinator's Work Plan for 2013:

- ARM rules: have been completed

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- Update Field/Policy manual + cost-list: Debbie working on specific project components, revising forms, and a new cost-list. Need to get field staff's input. This item remains a high priority.
 - Database: Active projects have been entered, although comparison of financial information has been difficult given the changes to database and lack of complete information in some files.
 - Continuation of habitat efforts in Regions 4 and 5. Habitat Forever has a personal services contract to do work in Billings, helped to have a "sole source" through the BLM. For Lewistown, a request for proposals was issued with Habitat Forever being the only "contractor" to submit a proposal.
 - Marketing Strategy. A meeting has been set up with Communications and Education at the end of April to develop a marketing strategy. Currently, the program has a new habitat brochure and the web site has been revamped.

2013 Work Plans for Regions 1, 2, 3, and 5:

Region 1: Working on a long-range strategic plan for Ninepipe WMA. Currently, 2013 will focus on the maintenance of food plots and nesting cover. North Shore WMA will monitor this year's waterfowl use on newly established vegetation.

Region 2: There are no present opportunities to improve habitat or access on private lands. Currently, there is field reconnaissance on cooperating private lands in the Blackfoot to help identify lek use by extant sharp-tail grouse. Jay added that ongoing effort between agencies and landowners in Blackfoot area. There appears to be interest in leading efforts to establish birds. Ben Deeble is spearheading these efforts. The region continues to provide guidance and input on FS management plans relative to mountain grouse. Region is beginning to see an upswing in subdivision proposals.

Region 3: Two major focus areas for UGB –Poindexter Slough FAS and Canyon Ferry WMA. There is great involvement from local PF chapters on both these project sites. Rick pointed out that new forms will be available to use so that PF Chapters and other conservation organizations will be able to enhance work as volunteers on FWP-managed lands. Gordon added that there is likely an opportunity along a FAS near Toston. Tom Pick and the Bozeman Chapter of PF have been taking the lead on this effort. Sagebrush conservation is ongoing. There appears to be an increase in sagebrush conversion to agricultural lands in southwestern Montana.

Region 5: Renewed partnerships with BLM and Habitat Forever. Work focus will continue on Pompey's Pillar, Yellowstone WMA, and Sundance SRMA. A little over 4 years has been invested in these project areas and staff feel that enhancement efforts are closer to realizing the sites' potential for pheasant habitat. A renewed partnership between the USFS will improve habitat for ruffed grouse through clearcutting decadent

stands of conifers. BLM needs to diversify its funding relative to the Habitat Forever position, which will include oversight on projects that benefit sage-grouse. Gordon asked if there was any “use data” on Pompey’s Pillar. The site is in Block Management and there are wing barrels out at the site. Gordon added it would be good to know what use data is available for other sites such as Coffee Creek, Wolf Creek, and other sites.

4. Diane provided an overview on Region 4’s 2013 field season focus.

Outreach: Actively contacting and communicating with prospective cooperators, agencies, and organizations. Newspaper ad was run in 6 local papers, sent out 110 letters to Block Management Cooperators, sent out 44 letters to expired UGBEP cooperators, sent 22 letters to Open Fields Cooperators, telling all about opportunities with the UGBEP. A pictorial binder was developed that depicts examples of different types of projects to show prospective landowners and what can be done.

New Projects: Has new projects “in the works” (some contracted, most just in the development phase) on at least 9 different project areas. Four pheasant release contracts authorized for 2013.

Challenges: the use of equipment by the public; loss of CRP; ability to get projects on state land.

Open Fields: Currently have 2 landowners interested. Time is short to get in front of CRP sign-up for 2013. Provided an overview of Open Fields accomplishments and performance during 2012.

Marias WMA: Craig asked about farming opportunities. Diane said that access and weed issues that need to be dealt with has inhibited progress for now.

Shift in landscape level geographic focus: Diane said that she had originally hoped to develop a large, landscape level projects area around Lake Frances but despite multiple trips there, nothing has come of it. However, Diane has successfully developed UGBEP projects on lands in the Choteau-Dutton-Fairfield that link up w/ Freezout and BMAs so she has shifted her landscape level focus to this area.

CRP: Gordon Bechard provided a comment on CRP. He suggested that where there are saline seeps, he would like to see land stay in CRP. He asked if UGBEP funding could offset the decrease in rental rates using UGBEP funding. Joe felt the added contribution will help keep operators enrolled in CRP. Joe and Mike felt that the Open Fields program is more effective if there’s an upfront payment followed by recording the contract. Brad added that producers liked, ready-made habitat where there are immediate results for habitat and access. In the previous program, 160 acres was the

enrollment maximum, but landowners added additional acres. Regions received double or triple the amount of acreage than what was paid for.

Craig moved to recommend duplicate federal program at \$300,000 level for 2013, based on same guidelines, leaving locations flexible. Gordon seconded. *Motion carried.*

5. Ryan provided an overview on Region 6's 2013 field season focus.

Focus Area: Three focus Big Muddy Corridor, NE corner of Sheridan County, Scobey (east Daniels Co.). Efforts will target Block Management Areas and seek leveraged funding from other sources.

Habitat projects targeted: Shelterbelts, Food Plots, nesting cover projects, wetland restoration, grazing system.

CRP: General sign up – Daniels, Sheridan, Roosevelt, Richland – 162K acres not re-enrolled in the past two years. This is the biggest issue right now and will be in the future of the UGB program and the upland game birds throughout the state.

Food Plots: Looking to revamp food plot mixes. Instead of a monoculture of grain that most likely doesn't benefit birds very long, plant food plot mixes that provide both brood and roosting cover year round. Provided an example of mixed planting. Would like to see the food plots go in a direction that will benefit birds throughout the entire food plot cycle. Many discussions with fellow biologist to create a good mix.

Shelterbelts: There are opportunities for improving old shelterbelts through establishment of shrubs in dead rows. Jay said that long, narrow shelterbelts don't have the same value as a block of cover. Ryan added that block plantings provide better thermal cover and improved protection from predators. An example would be taking a 600ft 8-row shelterbelt and making it a 300ft 16-row shelterbelt to create more of a block cover planting.

Outreach: Provided a review of outreach approaches (please add what these were).

- Sending letters out to Open Fields, BMA Cooperators, past cooperators
- Pamphlets
- Life After CRP
- BMA dinner, mentioning the program and the cost-sharing and talked with interested landowners
- Caragana promo
- "blind" calling past interested landowners
- Just getting out and knocking on doors...

Open Fields: Provided a review of projects currently enrolled in Open Fields.

Would like to see a new one if possible. There was a lot of interest in the NE Corner

Farming Work: If Dellus, who currently works with the Sheridan County Road Department, is retiring, would he consider coming back to do farming work via the Sheridan County MOU?

Update of ongoing projects

- Shelterbelts
- Grazing systems (not a quick process. Some take years)
- Hope to continue CRP and food plot renewals and new cooperators)
- Wetland restorations (some in the works but not sure of the outcome. Always seem to have interested landowners then they decide that they don't want to)
 - Hard to convince someone that a drained wetland is a benefit to wildlife
 - Worried that they will never be able to farm it/pull the plug again.

Pheasant releasing: Down to 1 raiser due to the other selling and the new owners having little time to raise birds. Total birds authorized for 2013 release is 6400 (including western R6).

- Earlier application process to help the raisers out. A little grumbling from cooperators but overall went just fine.

Emergency pheasant feeding: Did not initiate this spring. Most snow came in early-mid March and there was some concern about the loss of pheasants. Ryan and Mike Jensen both verified that if there is a loss of pheasants, it is most likely due to winter cover (shelterbelts, cattail sloughs, etc.) being choked up with snow. Pheasants seemed to be able to feed just fine. May have lost some birds but that's just observations from where birds were observed throughout the winter and no longer present after the March snow storms. Too early to tell. They may have just moved around some to find cover. Some areas appeared to have a significant number of pheasants compared to the months previous. Ryan showed photos of the snow.

Ryan gave a R6-wide update of habitat projects.

6. Brad provided an overview on Region 7's 2013 field season focus.

2013 work plan was developed relative to the strategic plan.

Focus Area: Reviewed R7's focus areas, which are sage-grouse core areas, pheasant areas.

Upcoming projects: The compounded effect of the drought has held up progress on shelterbelt projects. Seven Sisters WMA addition provides opportunities to use UGBEP funding to really enhance public land. Effort to restore uplands on some portions after the 2011 flood. Steve is actively contacting landowners who have expired contracts.

Monitoring projects: Steve will be monitoring half of the sagebrush leases.

Open Fields: Brad provided an overview of Open Fields projects in R7. Feedback from the region emphasized the continuation of the Open Fields approach, either through federal or UGBEP dollars.

Wild Turkeys: Starting to see turkeys come back in Region 7 and there is hope for good brood production. There has been a considerable decline the last few years. Also, about half of Custer National Forest burned last year, which was important turkey habitat.

7. **Bernie Hart handed out information on the NRCS Sage-Grouse Initiative, which he received from the Malta NRCS office.**

Wednesday, April 3.

No comments from Tuesday.

1. **Pete Husby provided an overview of NRCS Programs/Status of Programs and opportunities for partnering.**

Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP): there is a requirement of prime farm land with high cultural significance. There are 2 FWPP enrollments on the migration corridor for sage-grouse/pronghorn in north Valley County. One is pending in Centennial Valley, among other projects underway.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP): No funding in 2013. The intent of this program is to prevent conversion to cropland. Mostly used in sage-grouse core area and Rocky Mountain Front.

Wetland Reserve Program (WRP): Currently, WRP has been the biggest easement program in the US. There is no funding in 2013. Restorable wetlands are a requirement. Can take in un-altered wetlands as well as significant buffer around wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): This program pays for conservation performance. Eligibility requires "quality" criteria on all land uses with an agreement to

undertake additional conservation activities while improving, maintaining, and managing existing conservation activities.

Annual payment = acres X performance points X payment rate.

Council questioned whether it is possible to improve the wildlife habitat scoring section for CSP. The Citizens' Advisory Council would consider sending a letter to NRCS speaking to this need. Joe asked the department to draft a letter to this purpose.

Partnering opportunities and CSP: Pete encouraged talking more about the possibility of joint marketing to align FWP and CSP funding. This may be worth follow-up...depending if CSP gets funding.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP): The purpose of this program is to promote agricultural production, forest management, and environmental quality as compatible goals. Funding is geared to 60% county and 40% state priorities. Special initiatives include Organic Farming, America's Great Outdoors, and Sage-grouse Initiative. All WHIP dollars for Phillips, Blaine, Fergus, and Petroleum counties target sage-grouse, keep CRP in grass, and to develop grazing lands.

2. Ken McDonald provided updates.

Legislative updates –

- a. HB5 – Capital Budgets. We received compliments from the legislature specifically related to UGBEP. Pleasant change from the past with credit to the Council.
- b. Three-day upland game bird license for \$50. Department was informational because there were pros and cons. Sponsor did not coordinate with the department nor with the Council, which is why the Chair expressed concerns about the bill. Part of the concern also was the need for a more comprehensive look at license funding in the next session.
- c. SB341 (Fielder – Thompson Falls). Transplant bill, which would have eliminated pheasant stocking. This bill was tabled in House Committee.
- d. Focus on access programs, including Block Management. The Governor, in the appointment of new Commissioners, wants to revitalize the Private Lands Public Wildlife (PLPW) committee and have them focus on a complete review of access programs such as Block Management. UGBEP is also a significant access program.
- e. HB404. Taking \$1M from Habitat Montana for next two years to prop up Block Management. This bill could sunset in two years.

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- f. HB2. Sen. Brendan setting a percentage for Block Management administration and payments to landowners. This bill would reduce hunter access technicians for administering the program. However, many landowners are interested in more technicians to deal with access issues, rather than being concerned about payments. May sound good on the surface, but the majority of administration is directly working with landowners, paying for maps, taking reservations, helping direct. Craig Roberts commented that BMA technicians come in regularly and check in, this is very much appreciated by landowners.

Governor's Sage-grouse Task Force –

By end of September 2015, FWS would be making a recommendation on listing. Part of the decision will be based on whether there are adequate regulatory mechanisms in place to help conserve sage-grouse. Wyoming's executive order focuses primarily on energy development was the start of other states developing similar orders. Montana has received pressure to do something similar. Focus will be primarily energy development – wind, oil and gas, transmission lines, pipelines. Concurrently, BLM is doing revisions to resource management plans. Task Force would comprise representatives from a variety of interests. Tentative schedule, starting first of May and 10 meetings between then and end of the year. Initial meeting will be "Sage-Grouse 101" and hearing from Wyoming and Idaho. Joe suggested that anytime sage-grouse is mentioned, we should be making the link back to FWP's habitat programs.

Council Vacancies –

The Director appoints the council members. We will need a Republican Senator, someone from Region 1 (Terry Comstock's position) and one more position for Bernie Hart's position. Joe suggested a Senator who has some time left. The department will be working on filling these slots in the next couple of months. Council members are encouraged to put forth names if they know of anyone who may be interested.

Wildlife Division vacancies –

Currently, there are 7 wildlife biologist positions that are vacant. The Division has been holding off filling these vacancies until a budget has been established through the legislature. One of the things Ken has been exploring is the idea of specialist positions combined with field biologists, making smaller work areas but focused dedicated time to the Program. Jim Shockley expressed concern about this idea and establishing focused responsibility. Joe suggested the Council be part of the conversation.

Comments are captured below:

- Jay – If a greater capacity was “lost” due to specialists, it may be that we gained quality because of the dedicated staff. Original idea was to have full time people focused on program delivery.
- Joe – The intent was not to have dedicated staff take on the role of program delivery in place of the other full time biologists. There shouldn’t have been any capacity lost.
- Bill – The program was a focus of the legislature. This committee was assembled because department couldn’t provide focus.
- Graham – Speaking to the notion of capacity. Diane is assigned a 7-county area. Within this area, R4 is at capacity and it may be that the “cream of the crop” projects have already been conducted. The marketing campaign will try and continue energy and interest in the program in this 7-county area. There are other counties in Region 4 that are outside these counties. Even in Region 4, the capacity to produce is constrained within 7-county area. There is little capacity in those other areas, and in addition, Diane cannot cover these other areas. The new biologist in Lewistown has a work load that fills her day 120%, making it difficult to add other program implementations to her workload. Graham favors the specialist approach for dealing with the issue. He is not sure how to deal with capacity in the rest of the region that are also important areas for upland game birds. These projects take time. The reality in Region 4 is that it would not be beneficial or practical to spread a specialist across multiple positions.
- Gary Bertellotti – There is a balance to address a variety of resource demands. There is always a need to make hard decisions. He prefers to have a specialist in an area that has opportunity. For example, in the eastern part of R4, it is difficult to implement to program with only one person in addition to their other duties. A discussion is needed on how to balance all of the agency’s responsibilities.
- Ryan Williamson – Logistically, it is difficult to make regular trips south of the Missouri River, which is part of his area. Projects like grazing systems may be taking a hit because of the distance. Turnover is another issue. It’s not getting any easier to find a place to live in the NE corner. Actually getting very hard to find a place anymore. Understands the pros and cons of both directions but in some areas the UGB program would likely be pushed down on the priority scale with some biologists.
- Diane Boyd – Programmatically, Graham has encouraged all biologists to pursue UGBEP projects. Biologists have been sharing that responsibility, but Diane has taken the lead. About half of the biologists in R4 have pursued projects. Concern has been voiced over the potential lack of implementation if spread over other positions. On a personal level, there may be concern of being forced to move.
- Clive Rooney – PF contract provides services in the area around Denton.
- Craig Roberts – Some comments on the specialists versus generalists discussion. Working with Tom Stivers – his range of responsibilities were almost overwhelming.

He had passion for UGBEP but to pull that to the surface and make something happen was very difficult because of higher priorities. He did an incredible job of getting something completed in the midst of many responsibilities. Beckman WMA was a constant need for attention, etc. When working with DNRC – all were generalists, trying to make a presence with all different functions. Can't have specialists but a whole lot of different hats. Makes sense that other biologists have a percent of their time dedicated to the Program.

- Jay Gore – It makes sense to have specialists and to preserve these positions. For other biologists, the department needs to figure out how to fit time with program.
- Bill Howell – Ken clarified that if change was made, it would happen within the region, not across the state. Need to demonstrate a percent of time dedicated to program.
- Brad Schmitz – It is nice to be able to go to a generalist biologist and have work done on a variety of topics. So far, he has been pleased to see the focus. If there appears to be only “mediocre” projects, then there is a greater need to work harder. However, would like to see more work done in the field, but there is only so much one can get out of 2,080 hours each year. The ability to have other biologists contribute into program implementation will add more capacity. Maybe a management need is to make sure district biologists can fit it time for the program. He does not want to see the program falter – good to see the program propped back up and tightened up. May require more of a specialist to keep it tightened up...may be one reason why a generalist biologist may be spending less time on the program.
- Gordon Haugen – There appears to be little effort done in some areas. Brad Schmitz responded that sometimes there are differences or reflections in personal interests, but also the biologists' area of expertise operates within the regional context.
- Gary – Diane is only one person with a huge area but has made good strides. If quality projects and opportunities are less available, may need to spread out further. Gary observed that specialists have a committee and agency to look to. Previously, did not have that before. The committee helps with ties to the Governor's office and legislature.
- Joe Perry – Council has enjoyed being able to bring biologists in and hearing from them as program continues to be implemented.
- Mike – Not in favor of generalization. Looking at it from a business perspective, if a business “generalizes,” it can't maintain its efficiency. Generalizing doesn't work from a business standpoint.
- Roberts – From an historical perspective – there were issues between a PF chapter and management of a WMA. Since a specialist has been on board, there are activities going on with WMA that wasn't going on before. Some of the players have now been engaged and there has been an improvement in attitude. Some opportunities came about with chapters that didn't occur before.
- Jay – He would support not diluting the positions.

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- Mike – In consideration of the past, it appears to be difficult keeping positions filled. What can be done to keep people in positions?
 - Ken – Commented that he thought there would be an appreciation for being able to focus on one program; however, it has played out someone different.
 - Brad – There are personal choices related to movement as much as anything. His region would like to see longevity in positions.
 - **Motion to leave conversation as is. [Who motioned? Seconded? Carried?]**
 - Ken – The ultimate approval or disapproval is satisfaction expressed by the Council. Department will present in spring what has been planned and will report back in fall what was accomplished. If the Council is not satisfied, then the department needs to hear back from Council. The metric of success is based on what we hear back from the Council.
 - Jim Shockley – The Council cannot set policy, but he feels the council should make concerns known. He feels the legislature would support the specialist approach. The department has something that works...don't change it now.

Move that the council does not approve of the policy change to shift from specialist to generalist. [Who motioned?] Craig seconded. Carried unanimously.

3. Council discussed how FWP can do the farming for habitat projects. Mike gave an example of a farming position in TN. A farming position provides habitat on private land. Getting farming done on private lands seems to be an issue and a bottleneck. Mike would like to see a way to get these projects done by agency staff. Some considerations and suggestions identified in discussion:
 - Already pay for food plots, how would that work? Wouldn't expect to receive a payment. [Joe]
 - If the project was involved in Block Management, perhaps a 5-acre food plot be established to help enhance the Block Management area. [Mike]
 - Missouri does this with crews and in a sense this work is being accomplished in the Denton area. Many landowners don't have capacity or ability to do this due to other demands. [Craig]
 - Suggested that department explore contracting work to avoid overhead? [Joe]
 - Adding an FTE to do farm work isn't possible. If done privately, then the contractor has to be registered and insurance. [Ken]
 - Habitat Forever does the same thing in other states. Iowa has habitat specialists within the state that are equipped with 1-ton truck and tractor/implements. They do the work for landowners and are compensated through farm program payments that are available for that work. Probably 60-70 teams across the US doing this type of farm work. If Montana could get some farming work done,

that would be good. Also, to do work on state lands, there has to have assurance that the projects will be maintained. Pheasants Forever is interviewing for a statewide employee to promote Pheasant Forever and conservation. [Craig]

- Department will put this topic on the fall agenda for further discussion. It would be good for the agency to come up with scenarios for consideration. Will request the new Pheasants Forever employee at the next meeting.
- There are retired farmers that could be available for this kind of work. [Gordon]
- Looking at the Pheasants Forever approach, they have habitat teams and might help find solutions for how to tackle this situation. [Jay]

4. Gordon Haugen provided a discussion on Russian olive. He has an article from North Dakota where Russian Olive is still acceptable for use. Rather than statewide ban, there may be places in the state where it is still acceptable to establish. Suggested putting together a group to work with Dept. of Agriculture to investigate a similar approach. Tom Pick is working for NRCS under contract on a document regarding Russian olive along the Yellowstone River. Clive mentioned that the president of the weed control association may have interest in this.
5. Ken thanked Bernie Hart and Senator Shockley for their help with the council.
6. Next meeting: Helena, December 2-3, 2013.
7. Joe adjourned the meeting 12:00 pm.